

ICYMI: Here's Why You Should Care About the Tech and Finance Billionaires Trying to Influence State Judicial Races

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Bill Gates and his billionaire friends' latest attempt to privatize the state's education system: picking off incumbent state Supreme Court Justice Charlie Wiggins? [JStone](#) / [Shutterstock.com](#)

Last week, the *Seattle Times* [published a deep-dive](#) into independent expenditures against sitting state Supreme Court Justice Charlie Wiggins. You might not normally care about judicial races, but here's why you should: There's a troubling dynamic playing out in Washington State, where tech and finance billionaires are using large amounts of their own money in an attempt to change the judicial and educational systems.

Wiggins's opponent, Dave Larson, has been the beneficiary of more than half a million dollars in independent expenditures from the state GOP and the political action committee "Citizens for Working Courts," which is supported by a handful of rich tech donors. In addition, Citizens for Working Courts and another PAC, "Judicial Integrity

WA," has spent \$412,000 against Wiggins—a sum that manifested in attack ads against Wiggins for overturning a man's child pornography possession conviction.

Wiggins's campaign has raised just 60 percent of the sum of money being spent against him. Public campaign disclosure records show that no one has raised a cent in independent expenditures against Larson.

So who are the main people behind Citizens for Working Courts and Judicial Integrity WA?

- Bill Gates, who gave \$200,000 to Citizens for Working Courts
- Paul Allen's Vulcan Inc., which gave \$300,000 to Citizens for Working Courts
- Steve and Connie Ballmer, of Microsoft fame, who gave \$25,000 to Citizens for Working Courts
- Microsoft president Brad Smith and his wife Kathy Surace-Smith, who gave \$14,000 to Citizens for Working Courts
- Ken Fisher, investment billionaire, who gave \$350,000 to Judicial Integrity WA
- Anti-light rail developer Kemper Freeman's Kemper Holdings, which gave \$50,000 to Judicial Integrity WA
- Wireless industry billionaire and Microsoft board member John Stanton, who gave \$50,000 to Judicial Integrity WA

You might be asking yourself why this particular group of Washington's tech and finance billionaires would spend so much on a single judicial race. Is it really that all of these billionaires are upset about an overturned child pornography conviction? (Citing a judge's decisions on kiddie porn seems to be a common campaign tactic that usually masks other political aims; take for example the [tobacco industry's attack ads](#) on Mississippi state Supreme Court Justice Jim Kitchens.)

Well, here's a clue to those other political aims: Rodney Tom, who runs the Judicial Integrity PAC, told the *Times* about something else that's bothering the wealthy tech community: "Wiggins' support of the charter-school and McCleary school-funding rulings, as well his general support of government agencies over the 'little guy.'"

Justice Wiggins did two big things that pissed off the tech elite who have been pouring their money into education reform (and are now pouring money into defeating him). The first is that Wiggins supported the majority opinions on the state supreme court's decision to demand the state fund its public schools and sanction the state until it does so. The second: supporting the supreme court's majority ruling that charter schools are unconstitutional.

In a [blog post](#) on the judicial race, longtime Seattle education blogger Dora Taylor interpreted the tech billionaire's spending in one way: "The Washington State Supreme Court made the decision that charter schools are unconstitutional in Washington State but Mr. Gates and others are determined to privatize the state's public school system by any means."

It's no secret that the Gates Foundation has been trying to make room for publicly-funded, privately-run charter schools in the state's educational system for years. The same people funding all the independent expenditures against Wiggins were also involved in [creating the 2012 charter schools ballot initiative](#) that was later deemed unconstitutional by the state Supreme Court. For that initiative, Paul Allen's Vulcan Inc. spent \$1.6 million, the Ballmers spent \$500,000, and the Gates Foundation raised more than \$3 million.

Here it's worth noting Paul Allen and Steve Ballmer's political activism [on another front](#). Both Allen and Ballmer spent [hundreds of thousands of dollars](#) to defeat the 2010 ballot initiative that would have created a high-earners income tax in the State of Washington—an income tax that would have [used rich people's money](#) to fund needy public schools.

In sum: exerting influence over the ballot initiative process wasn't enough to get the tech and finance billionaires the charter schools they wanted, so now it looks like they're hoping that picking off individual state Supreme Court justices will do the trick.

(I've reached out to the Gates Foundation, Vulcan Inc., and the campaign managers for both Citizens for Working Courts and Judicial Integrity WA to see if charter schools and *McCleary* were indeed the motivating factors behind these expenditures. I'll update if I hear back.)

Update: Yep, Vulcan's involvement in the judicial race has a lot to do with charter schools. Here's a statement from the company.

Paul G. Allen's contribution to Citizens for Working Courts Enterprise Washington is intended to ensure innovation in education - including charter schools - remains a priority in Washington State. We were dismayed by the court's 2015 ruling to strike down charter schools and are committed to ensuring that politics don't hinder the development of practices that could provide life-changing experiences for all types of students.

Paul and his company Vulcan Inc. have supported a number of programs to improve students' access to innovative education practices that translate to real-world success, which includes advancing charter schools in the state of Washington. Charter schools offer flexibility in operations, provide hands-on learning and innovative curricula, and can be held to higher standards and accountability.